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Harding, Warren Gamaliel, Pres. U.S.

President Harding's Address

at the

Dedication

of the

Lincoln Memorial

Washington, D. C.

30 May 1922

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ADDRESS

Mr. Chief Justice:

It is a supreme satisfaction officially to accept on behalf of the Government this superb monument to the savior of the republic. No official duty could be more welcome, no official function more pleasing. This memorial edifice is a noble tribute, gratefully bestowed, and in its offering is the reverent heart of America; in its dedication is the consciousness of reverence and gratitude beautifully expressed.

Somehow my emotions incline me to speak simply as a reverent and grateful American rather than one in official responsibility. I am thus inclined because the true measure of Lincoln is in his place today in the heart of American citizenship, though more than half a century has passed since his colossal service and his martyrdom. In every moment of peril, in every hour of discouragement, whenever the clouds gather, there is the image of Lincoln to rivet our hopes and to renew our faith. Whenever there is a glow of triumph over national achievement, there comes the reminder that but for Lincoln's heroic and unalterable faith in the Union, these triumphs could not have been.

No great character in all history has been more eulogized, no towering figure more monumented, no likeness more portrayed. Painters and sculptors portray as they see, and no two see precisely alike. So, too, is there varied emphasis in the portraiture of words; but all are agreed about the rugged greatness, the surpassing tenderness, the unfailing wisdom of this master martyr.

History is concerned with the things accomplished. Biography deals with the methods and the individual attributes which led to accomplishment.

The supreme chapter in history is not emancipation, though that achievement would have exalted Lincoln throughout all the ages. The simple truth is that Lincoln, recognizing an established order, would have compromised with the slavery that existed, if he could have halted its extension. Hating human slavery as he did, he doubtless believed in its ultimate abolition through the developing conscience of the American people, but he would have been the last man in the Republic to resort to arms to effect its abolition. Emancipation was a means to the great end—maintained union and nationality. Here was the great purpose, here the towering hope,

here the supreme faith. He treasured the inheritance handed down by the founding fathers, the ark of the covenant wrought through their heroic sacrifices, and builded in their inspired genius. The union must be preserved. It was the central thought, the unalterable purpose, the unyielding intent, the foundation of faith. It was worth every sacrifice, justified every cost, steeled the heart to sanction every crimsoned tide of blood. Here was the great experiment—popular government and constitutional union—menaced by greed expressed in human chattels. With the greed restricted and unthreatened, he could temporize. When it challenged federal authority and threatened the union, it pronounced its own doom. In the first inaugural, he quoted and reiterated his own oft-repeated utterance—"I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." He believed in maintaining inviolate the rights of the States, but he believed no less firmly in the perpetuity of the union of the States. The union, having been contracted, could not be dissolved except by consent of all parties to the contract. He recognized the conflicting viewpoints, differing policies and controverted questions. But there were constitutional methods of settlement, and these must be employed.

In the first inaugural address he stressed the great general principle that

> "in our constitutional controversies we divide into majorities and minorities. If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the Government must cease. There is no other alternative, for continuing the Government is acquiescence on one side or the other. If the minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them. * * * Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or despotism".

Here spoke the statesman, proclaiming deliberate public opinion as the supreme power of civilization, easily to be written into law when conviction should command. It ought to be tonic to the waning confidence of those of today who grow impatient that emphasized minority views are not hurried into the majority expressions of the Republic. Deliberate public opinion never fails.

Later, closing his first inaugural, when anxiety gripped the Nation, there spoke the generous, forgiving, sympathetic man of undaunted faith:

> "I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the union, when again touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature."

But he appealed in vain. Passion was aflame and war was made the arbiter. Americans fought Americans with equal courage and valor. There was an ambiguity in the constitution, which only a baptism in blood could efface. One may only speculate on what another might have done, but Fate seems to have summoned the one great hero best fitted to lead to the union's salvation.

His faith was inspiring, his resolution commanding, his sympathy reassuring, his simplicity enlisting, his patience unfailing. He was Faith, Patience and Courage, with his head above the clouds, unmoved by the storms which raged about his feet.

No leader was ever more unsparingly criticized or more bitterly assailed. He was lashed by angry tongues and ridiculed in press and speech until he drank from as bitter a cup as was ever put to human lips, but his faith was unshaken and his patience never exhausted. Some one sent me recently an illumined and framed quotation which fell from his lips when the storm of criticism was at its height:

> "If I were trying to read," he said, "much less answer all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the best I know how, the very best I can; and I mean to keep on doing it to the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me will not amount to anything. If the end brings me out all wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference."

He knew, of course, before the assassin robbed him of fuller realization, that the end was bringing him out all right. He knew when swords were sheathed and guns laid down, that the union he saved was riveted anew and made forever indissoluble. He knew that in the great crucible of fire and blood the dross had been burned from the misdirected patriotism of seceding states and the pure gold restored to shining stars in dear Old Glory again. He knew he had freed a race of bondmen and had given to the world the costly proof of the perpetuity of the American union. But I cannot restrain the wish that he might somehow know of the monuments to his memory throughout the world, and that we are dedicating today,

on behalf of a grateful nation, this matchless memorial, whose forty-eight columns, representing forty-eight states in the concord of union, testify that the "end brought him out all right".

Reflecting now on the lampooning and heedless attack and unjustifiable abuse which bruised his heart and tested his patience, we may accept its expression as one of the abused privileges under popular government, when passion sways and bitterness inspires, but for which there is compensation in the assurance that when men have their feet firmly planted in the right, and do the very best they can and "keep on doing it", they come out all right in the end, and all the storm does not amount to anything.

He rose to colossal stature in a day of imperiled union. He first appealed, and then commanded, and left the union secure and the nation supreme. His was a leadership for a great crisis, made loftier because of the inherent righteousness of his cause and the sublimity of his own faith. Washington inspired belief in the republic in its heroic beginning, Lincoln proved its quality in the heroic preservation. The old world had wondered about the new-world experiment, and was quite ready to proclaim its futility when the civil war was threatening; but Lincoln left the union unchallenged for all succeeding time. Not only was our nation given a new birth of freedom, but democracy was given a new sanction by that hand of divinity itself which has written the rights of humankind and pointed the way to their enjoyment.

Abraham Lincoln was no superman. Like the great Washington, whose monumental shaft towers nearby as a fit companion to the memorial we dedicate today, the two testifying the grateful love of all Americans to founder and savior—like Washington, Lincoln was a very natural human being, with the frailties mixed with the virtues of humanity. There are neither supermen nor demi-gods in the government of kingdoms, empires, or republics. It will be better for our conception of government and its institutions if we will understand this fact. It is vastly greater than finding the superman if we justify the confidence that our institutions are capable of bringing into authority, in time of stress, men big enough and strong enough to meet all demands.

Washington and Lincoln offered outstanding proof that a representative popular government, constitutionally founded, can find its own way to salvation and accomplishment. In the very beginning our American democracy turned to Washington, the aristocrat, for leadership in revolution, and the greater task of founding permanent institutions. The wisdom of Washington and Jefferson and Hamilton and Franklin was proven when Lincoln, the child of privation, of hardship, of barren environment and meager opportunity, rose to unquestioned leadership when disunion threatened.

Lincoln came almost as humbly as The Child of Bethlehem. His parents were unlettered, his home was devoid of every element of culture and refinement. He was no infant prodigy, no luxury facilitated or privilege hastened his development, but he had a God-given intellect, a love for work, a willingness to labor and a purpose to succeed.

Biographies differ about his ambition, but Herndon, who knew him as did no other, says he was greatly ambitious. I can believe that. Ambition is a commendable attribute, without which no man succeeds. Only inconsiderate ambition imperils.

Lincoln was modest, but he was sure of himself, and always greatly simple. Therein was his appeal to the confidence of his country. When he believed he was right a nation believed him to be right, and offered all in his support.

His work was so colossal, in the face of such discouragement, that none will dispute that he was incomparably the greatest of our Presidents. He came to authority when the Republic was beset by foes at home and abroad, and reestablished union and security. He made that gesture of his surpassing generosity which began reunion. Let us forget the treachery, corruption, and incompetence with which he had to combat, and recall his wisdom, his unselfishness, his sublime patience. He resented no calumnies upon himself; he held no man his enemy who had the power and will to serve the union, his vision was blinded by no jealousy. He took his advisers from among his rivals, invoked their patriotism and ignored their plottings. He dominated them by the sheer greatness of his intellect, the singleness and honesty of his purpose, and made them responsive to his hand for the accomplishment of the exalted purpose. Amid it all there was a gentleness, a kindness, a sympathetic sorrow, which suggest a divine intent to blend mercy with power in supreme attainment.

This memorial, matchless tribute that it is, is less for Abraham Lincoln than for those of us today, and for those who follow after. His surpassing compensation would have been in living, to have his ten thousand sorrows dissipated in the rejoicings of the succeeding half century. He loved "his boys" in the Army, and would have reveled in the great part they played in more than a half century of the pursuit of peace, and concord restored. How he would have been exalted by the chorus of the union after "the mystic chords" were "touched by the better angels of our nature"! How it would comfort his great soul to know that the States in the Southland join sincerely in honoring him, and have twice, since his day, joined, with all the fervor of his own great heart, in defending the flag! How it would soften his anguish to know that the South long since came to realize that a vain assassin robbed it of its most sincere

and potent friend when it was prostrate and stricken, when Lincoln's sympathy and understanding would have helped to heal the wounds and hide the scars and speed the restoration! How with his love of freedom and justice, this apostle of humanity would have found his sorrows tenfold repaid to see the hundred millions to whom he bequeathed reunion and nationality, giving of their sons and daughters and all their fortunes to halt the armed march of autocracy and preserve civilization, even as he preserved the union!

More, how his great American heart would be aglow to note how resolutely we are going on, always on, holding to constitutional methods, amending to meet the requirements of a progressive civilization, clinging to majority rule, properly restrained, which is "the only true sovereign of a free people," and working to the fulfillment of the destiny of the world's greatest republic!

Fifty-seven years ago this people gave from their ranks, sprung from their own fiber, this plain man, holding their common ideals. They gave him first to service of the nation in the hour of peril, then to their Pantheon of Fame. With them and by them he is enshrined and exalted forever.

Today American gratitude, love and appreciation, give to Abraham Lincoln this lone white temple, a Pantheon for him alone.

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